

I Love the University

I went to visit a friend today at MIT. The past few days I'd been reading more stuff from academia and just that morning I was reading responses to my old posts at Stanford, so academia's siren song had been on my mind. But getting off the subway at MIT, with me full of energy after a morning jog, the sun shining brightly down, I couldn't help but feel like I was missing something, seeing smiles on the faces of the young geniuses who were everywhere around me.

Perhaps it's natural, when doing something so greedy and practical as a startup, to pine for the idealized world of academia. Its image as a place in an idyllic location filled with smart people has always been attractive; even more so with the sense that by being there one can get smarter simply through osmosis. People describe a place of continual geekiness, of throwing chemicals into the river and building robots in free time. A magical place for hackers to just enjoy themselves.

It's not that I don't enjoy my work; it's just that I feel like I'm getting dumber doing it. Or, at least, that I'm not getting as smart as I should.

This academaphilia isn't new. It's clearly what drove magazines like Lingua Franca and makes saying obscure names and words so impressive. But for some reason it feels stronger now. I've started downloading class syllabuses off the Web and doing the reading assignments at night; I've started thinking about how to sneak into courses and hang out with academics. In Cambridge, this paradise seems so close, so accessible.

And yet, it's hardly paradise at all. When I was actually there I was turned off by the conformism, the lack of interest in real work, the politics, the pointless assignments. My lunch date is a grad student and he tells me of the internecine squabbles, the overspecialization, the abandonment, the insecurity.

I go back to the W3C's offices and stand at the balcony. Down below, Tim Berners-Lee discusses details of a project with a group of kids who presumably took this on as summer job. I was once one of those kids, working there, and I think about why I left and why I miss it. I marvel at the pointlessness, the impracticality, the waste.

The sky is overcast now, the crowds of students have thinned out, and those that remain scurry from place to place with their heads down. I'm tired now, I feel sadder, and I wonder how I lost so much so quickly.

I want to feel nostalgic, I want to feel like there's this place, just a couple subway stops away, where everything will be alright. A better place, a place I should be in, a place I can go back to. But even just visiting it, the facts are plain. It doesn't exist, it never has. I'm nostalgic for a place that never existed.

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